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## TOWARDS UGLINESS : A REVISION OF OLD OPINIONS

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**S**TUDENTS of musical history must often have made the surprising discovery that at certain times the world seems drawn towards what, at the time of its appearance, is reckoned as ugliness. Instead of the art moving onwards, as we might expect, from beauty to beauty, it seems as if some perverse spirit entered into composers and drove them towards discord instead of harmony. This tendency has been accounted for in many ways; some have seen in it a sign of degeneracy; others suppose that the writers who prefer discord to concord are lacking in the sense of beauty, while others again think that mere perversity is at the bottom of the movement. But it is surely not to be supposed that any sane person would deliberately prefer what he thought ugly to what he thought beautiful, and in more arts than one the course of events and the development of public taste have shown that in shocking his contemporaries the artist has been led by the love of a beauty that he, but no other as yet, can discern. Over and over again it has happened that pictures, statues, poems and music which have been held as ugly or eccentric by one generation have been accepted as beautiful by the next. The truth is that the cult of beauty has not been abandoned, or its standards lowered, but that, as time goes on, more and more kinds of beauty are appreciated by ordinary people; beauty is always conquering new dominions.

But the course of artistic progress from obvious to subtle types of beauty has been by no means continuous. Between suavity and roughness the pendulum of the arts must always have

swung, and it is enough to glance at a list of the most eminent names in any art, to see that in some phases youthful simplicity and natural grace pass into mere milk-and-water prettiness, and that the natural revulsion from this is in the direction of rugged individuality. Sometimes, too, an idiom that may have been one man's natural means of expression, has become so conventionalized as to be quite meaningless for his successors; at such times men have been apt to throw off their old fetters, and to seek for new forms in which to cast their ideas, without considering the claims of mere beauty. After the inspiration of the Elizabethan poets had been lost in a fog of forced "conceits," what was admired as "Good Sense" took the place of Fancy, and, in its turn, the formalism of the heroic couplet became so mechanical that there was nothing for the later poets to do but to break with it altogether, and strike out new metrical paths. In painting, the conventions of the Lely school of court portrait-painters were exchanged for the freer and more characteristic treatment which we associate with the names of Gainsborough and Romney. From their success the love of the obviously pretty directed the course of fashionable art, until we got to the silly smirk of the Victorian types, from the cloying sugariness of which the Preraphaelites had to rescue us. The Preraphaelite revolution is perhaps the best example of what I mean, as many people now living can remember the horror with which each picture by Millais or Rossetti was greeted by those who were not ashamed to swell the chorus of admiration for such things as Frith's "Derby Day." Few may be able to recall the storms that raged round the poems of Browning in the world of letters, but the feelings aroused by the art of Whistler, Sargent, Degas, Rodin, are still fresh in many minds. My point is that each of these men, though execrated as a champion of ugliness when he appeared, is now accepted as having enlarged, in some direction or other, the world's stock of beautiful things.

In the early stages of the art of music, the greatest revolution was that of 1600, when the polyphonic school, culminating in Palestrina, had reached so intricate a sweetness, so full and rich a subtlety, that it could go no farther. The reaction, on that occasion, was in the direction of an ideal dramatic art, and the experiments of the Florentine amateurs at the Bardi Palace led on, as every student knows, to the invention and development of Opera. But at first Monteverde and Caccini were held to be writing what was unworthy of the name of music. To substitute a single thread of attenuated melody for the gorgeous colouring of motet or madrigal may well have seemed a sad falling-off from

the true path of art; and we know that the various sins against the strict contrapuntal laws of the time were associated with thematic ideas that were in themselves not very beautiful. Opera, in its turn, passed through many phases of increasing dramatic force, before reaching, under Bellini and Donizetti, the cloying sweetness which compelled a sharp severance with tradition if opera was to endure as a living form of art. This severance was accomplished by Wagner, virtually single-handed; and it is easy to recall the outcry against "ugliness" which arose at each stage of Wagner's progress, from the story of Rossini's trying whether the score of *Tannhäuser* could be got to sound less reprehensible if played upside down, to the complaints of the public as to the *longueurs* of the *Ring*, complaints which are now-a-days carefully concealed by those who want to be in the swim of things musical.

The rise of homophonic art in 1600 led, eventually, to a more fruitful type of music than the opera, in the classical symphonic form, which reigned over music from Haydn to Brahms. At last this pattern had become so stereotyped and formal that efforts were quietly made in various directions to enlarge its scope, to modify its rules, or, in the last resort, to substitute some other form for that of the "sonata." Liszt's thematic metempsychosis was one attempt to create a new type for instrumental music; but it soon proved sterile, and hitherto no form has been found satisfactory enough to be generally adopted, for even César Franck, the originator of the most important artistic revolution of modern times, could not settle on any one of the different plans he devised. Henceforth it would seem that a regular formal scheme is not to be looked for in the higher walks of music; so that hearers have now no guide to the music they listen to, except the title of the piece, or the "programme" it is supposed to illustrate. This is perhaps the less to be regretted, since the modern school, in whatever country we may encounter it, values poetic suggestion more highly than musical interest, so that its appeal is to a less highly cultivated type of musician than the old-fashioned listener to the classical symphonies.

Whether we regard the modern revolt as beginning in France or in Germany does not greatly matter; in Germany it took the form of heaping-up every imaginable medium of sound, as though in the hope that some would sound well; Richard Strauss's abandonment of the classical forms may have been due in part to his obvious want of skill in their use, rather than to any lack of vitality in the forms themselves. The principal gain of the modern revolution is in the direction of effects produced by delicate

manipulation of tone-quality, and this is due to Debussy more than to any one else; it was left for him to get new and perfectly legitimate effects from the piano, and his exquisite use of a few touches makes his treatment of orchestral and other instruments rank as a work of a master. But the strangeness of the musical ideas in the French music and the mass of unpleasing sounds in the German, struck ordinary people as so many steps in the direction of ugliness, and only after many repetitions could the compositions of either nationality begin to win appreciation.

The psychology of this appreciation is curious, and what we have seen happen in our own times must have happened in the old artistic revolutions. Who are the people who first accept the new theories and products? Are they the professional critics, the artists versed in the history and practice of their art, the public at large, or a clique of the pioneer's friends, anxious to push him before the world? It must be owned with regret that it is generally these last who succeed in obtaining recognition for their friend. The responsible critics, as a body, are quite rightly reluctant to embrace every new "fad" that comes before them, and it is small wonder if sometimes they mistake the first attempts in a fresh direction for the visions of some hare-brained crank. Here and there, of course, there are other critics who are so anxious to make people talk about them that they are ready to take up any unusual attitude, and who use the innovation as a ladder for themselves to climb. The men who have given their lives to the service of any art are most seldom broad-minded enough to tolerate innovations; and if they were to accept the changes, it is reasonable to suppose that they would not go far along the new path; if they did, the fact would argue that their progress along the old had not been highly successful. Two illustrious exceptions to this rule are Orlando Gibbons and Giuseppe Verdi, both of whom, after great successes in the older style, assimilated the theories of the revolutions of their time and achieved masterpieces in the new style. It is natural that the majority of those who have reached eminence in the older forms should be slow to accept what is opposed to their own theories and convictions, but it is going too far to label them indiscriminately as "academics," although there is such a thing as a pig-headed obstinacy that does harm to everybody, since it confirms the innovator in his less admirable mannerisms rather than in his healthier qualities, and strengthens the excusable apathy of the general public by giving them something to quote that is backed by high authority. As an instance of the way in which mannerisms may be perpetuated by

conventional criticism, the case of Robert Browning will occur to all students of literature. His *Pacchierotto* shows, perhaps more plainly than any other of his poems, the kind of effect which critical commonplaces had upon him. As we watch the methods adopted by the clique of admirers, it is tragic to think how many innovators may have failed to accomplish some interesting development of art, for want of active and influential worshippers to set the world talking about them. The admirers are nearly always distrusted at first, and it is natural that people should suspect their motives in praising so warmly what all the experts unite to condemn. But gradually more and more individuals perceive that there is "something in" the innovation, and one fine day we ordinary people awake to the fact that the thing we derided yesterday as a "fad" has become a classic to-day. In connection with music, there is one cause why some of the common people, or at least those who are not definitely musical, are more willing than educated musicians to accept what the bulk of mankind think very ugly. In the old days of the Crystal Palace Saturday Concerts, there were rows of elderly ladies who were supposed to have knitted their way through the whole of the classical repertory; to these one symphony was very much the same as another, and the *tricoteuses* made the discovery that new music which was disapproved by their musical friends was no more unmeaning to them than Beethoven had been (since all were alike cryptic); whereupon they joined the clique of the innovator's admirers, and proceeded to look down on their musical friends for failing to reach the heights they had attained. Over and over again, in the days of the Wagnerian controversy, one met people with no pretensions to musical taste who had become whole-hearted devotees of Wagner.

It is from this class that the writers have been recruited who go to the extreme of accepting everything they do not understand as good music. *Omne ignotum pro magnifico*, indeed. "Let us beware," they say, "lest we follow the steps of those who rejected the great masters of the past; let us embrace all that offends the conventional amateur, all that is likely to *épater le bourgeois*." At the back of their minds, I think these writers have a personal grudge against the classical masters, and particularly against Beethoven. One is reminded of the often-quoted utterance of an admirer of some Scottish tragedy (was it Home's *Douglas*?) "Whaur's yer Wully Shakespeare noo?" Insidiously and from many quarters simultaneously, attacks are being made on the supreme master of music; now his songs are accused of

poverty of invention, and now something else is brought up which does not show him at his best; some years ago, *Fidelio* was kept out of the repertory of the Opera in London because the scenery was considered too dingy and the costumes too monotonous. All this, of course, does not touch the position of Beethoven in the firmament of music, but it is not without its effect in checking the musical education of those who accept as gospel whatever they read in print. Certain great names, and Beethoven's is one, can be used as standards in order that we may form an idea of what should be accepted and what rejected, among the new works that seem at first all alike in their lack of charm and coherence. Is it possible to find any touchstones to test things that seem chaotic as well as cacophonous? I think it is, and we may trace in the modern music itself some general principles which may become conventions until the next revolution occurs. For the present revolution has advanced far enough for us to obtain some ideas, dim though they may be, of the principles adopted by the younger composers, and even of some of the mannerisms that have begun to conventionalize their work. In two directions at least, they have established rules (whether written or unwritten, I do not know) which are evidently meant to shut the door upon mere prettiness. One is that the notes of a melody should not follow the intervals of a chord, so that a theme like that of the opening of the *Eroica* would be forbidden, and such suave musical ideas as appear throughout Brahms's violin concerto or second symphony stand in the same condemnation. Another rule is that the tonic chord is now recognized as including the sixth of the key, major or minor, not as an extra or passing note, used as an "added sixth," but as an integral part of the harmony, even in the close of a composition. This of course is more or less closely analogous to the inclusion of the seventh in the dominant harmony, which was accomplished many years ago. Of late years there has been some reaction against this and we are sometimes allowed to hear the real dominant harmony without the seventh; but in the later Victorian era, the pure dominant without the seventh would have seemed incomplete, and I myself have heard examiners who had asked for the dominant harmony of some key, express themselves perfectly satisfied when the candidate played the chord of the dominant seventh. Yet another detail of the new music must be mentioned. The augmented triad occurs, of course, in many passages of the classics, but there it is used sparingly; much of the new music would disappear if this chord, and its correlated scale of six whole tones, were eliminated.

The Mrs. Partingtons of our time cry out that these conventions, arising as they do from the tempered scale, and having no place in the natural harmonic system, should be dismissed on that account; but they forget that the diminished seventh, that joy of the Victorian hymn-tune-writers, is just as far removed from pure intonation as these are, and to the ears on which it fell at first it must have seemed quite as unpleasing as the augmented triad does to old-fashioned people now. Again, the plan of structure in some of the new music is altogether admirable; because it is not the old "sonata-form" is no good reason for despising it, for its symmetry can be perceived even without a special education. But at the same time there exist mere tangles of notes which come before the musical public as compositions, while they really have no claim to be called music at all; no revolution can possibly bring us round to these, since they lack all principle, and their only effect is to keep back fair-minded people from the study of the new compositions which are rational and significant.

The gradual inclusion of what were extraneous notes may give us a clue to the course of the development of the art. It is not so much that music, or any other art, moves deliberately in the direction of recognized ugliness, as that, in the course of time, the limits of the beautiful are continually being enlarged, and we old fogies must reconcile ourselves to the admission, into the realm of serious music, of noises for the making of which children in our own youth were smacked and sent to bed.

Of course, the taste we may hope to acquire for the new idioms of music will have the effect of abolishing the vogue of certain idioms with which we have grown up. Few of us are able to recall from personal experience the times when the third or mediant of the key was so absurdly insisted on in the sugary melodies of Bellini, Donizetti, and their fellows; but there the tunes stand for all to see, and there are still to be found among the English clergy persons besides the composer who find satisfaction in the terrible tune to "Fight the good fight" which appears in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. This effusion contains 32 notes, of which exactly half are repetitions of the third of the key; we have fortunately outgrown this monotony of invention, and we ought to be grateful for anything that frees us from the chains of such things. But we may find ourselves in a worse plight still, for if the augmented triad, the whole-tone scale, and similar clichés, should penetrate as far down the musical trade as the purveyors of hymn-tunes, we may live to long for the return of the molasses of the Victorian era.





write unsuitable remarks on the walls. That the new music does contain a good deal more than its champions allow us to see, will be admitted by any one who has studied the music carefully for himself; cannot some writer be found to do for this phase of art what Grove did for the older classics? The kind of beauty that is being discovered in these fresh quarters is certainly not evident to every one at a first hearing, and if the idea of its being merely impudent music should become more general, the kind of appreciation it will gain will not be the most wholesome. This new art has justified its existence, and must be reckoned with seriously; the average amateur well deserves a little help in getting hold of the new idioms, and a little information as to the qualities for which he is to look in the works he hears.